

Food In The Mail—Is It Safe?

(NAPS)—Surprise! You don't have to cook dinner tonight. No, it's not a pizza delivery. There's a gift package of food at your front door. Maybe it's smoked turkey or a ham from a friend. "Keep Refrigerated," the box reads. Uh, oh. It's been sitting in the sun. When did it arrive? Is it safe to eat?


The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Meat and Poultry Hotline cautions that the food gift you receive or send could give you an unwanted "surprise"—foodborne illness—if it is not delivered promptly and handled properly. Mail order food companies take steps to produce a safe, high quality product and to maintain the safety and quality during shipping. "So it is important for consumers to handle the product safely once the perishable items are received," says Susan Conley, director of the Food Safety Education for the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS).

There's a lot of sending going on. The Direct Marketing Association (DMA) says Americans this year will spend more than \$6 billion on food purchases by mail. "Catalogues and Web sites are convenient for holiday gift-giving since you can place the order, and have it delivered with just one phone call or online order," says Amy Blankenship, director of The DMA's Shop-At-Home Information Center.

When receiving or sending meat, poultry or other perishable foods, they should be shipped in an insulated box packed with frozen gel packs or dry ice.

"Keep Refrigerated" should be on the package. Even if a product is smoked, cured and/or fully cooked, it is still perishable and



Food in the mail is a nice holiday surprise. Be sure its handled safely for gift-giving. 

must be kept cold. When received, the perishable food should either be frozen, have visible ice crystals, or feel refrigerated cold to the touch. If the food is not cold, notify the company. Do not eat it or even take a bite.

Homemade food gifts are often sent by mail during the holidays. Perishable foods should be shipped frozen with frozen gel packs or dry ice. Ideally the box should be wrapped in two layers of brown paper and mailed by the fastest shipping method possible.

For more information about the safety of food in the mail, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at 1-800-535-4555 or TTY—800-256-7072, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern time, Monday-Friday. Recorded messages are also available 24 hours a day by calling the same number. Consumer information is also available at the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

For sources of reputable catalog and Internet food retailers, check the DMA's consumer Web site at www.shopthenet.org.